Hibiscus...Without a Net!

by Sam Andrews

Introductions and Other Matters

Again, welcome to Hibiscus... Without a Net! My name is Sam Andrews writing this special column for American Hibiscus Society Members-At-Large or MAL's.

Do I Smell Something?

Correspondence since the last column has produced several observations regarding scent in Hibiscus rosa-sinensis. Here is part of a message from Matt Martindale of Martindale's Nursery aka, "Hibiscus Place" (www.hibiscusplace.com) located in Summerdale, Florida.

"I have noticed a scent from White Kalakaua or Elephant Ear. It is subtle but in the morning I can smell it. Also, Kinchen's Yellow has a nice scent on some mornings for me. Over the past few months, Heaven Scent (about a 1 year old 3 gallon size plant) from Charles Black (Hidden Valley Nursery) has been putting out bloom after bloom, and most of them have had a very nice and noticeable fragrance in the morning. It has also been a great growing, full bush with endless beautiful double yellow blooms.

We have also had the opportunity to grow and test Sonny's Flameball (Rosalind x Ruth Watson) over the past 1 1/2 years here in Florida. It is also giving us some very fragrant blooms. If I had to define the fragrance of Flameball, I guess I would say delicious — although that probably doesn't mean much. Interestingly, I think that both Heaven Scent and Flameball have a common parent— Rosalind. The plant is extremely vigorous and the bloom is a beautiful double orange with yellow splotches. The orange is more vibrant than Rosalind. The scent definitely seems to be more persistent than the others lasting into the afternoon on some days. The fact that some of its offspring are also scented means that maybe the hybridizers can get more and more scented hibiscus into the pool?"

Sonny Stollings grows and breeds hibiscus – without a net – in Abingdon, Maryland.

Speaking of Breeding

One of the "dreams" of hibiscus hybridizers around the world is to combine the beauty of the tropical hibiscus, Hibiscus rosa-sinensis with the cold hardy members of the genus such as Hibiscus moscheutos, Hibiscus coccineus, Hibiscus syriacus, etc. Early Society members Ross Gast and Dr. Ronald Egolf of the USDA were notably interested in this pursuit.

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To this end, Sonny Stollings, mentioned above, claims to have produced a single seed pod on a purple Hibiscus syriacus (Rose of Sharon, Althea) that was crossed with H. rosa-sinensis cultivar Ruth Watson. Two seed were planted with one blooming once in five years of Maryland indoor care. In discussing this supposed impossible feat and after looking at Sonny's photos, he may indeed have done it. See for yourself below.

Figure 1 — Close-ups of Rose of Sharon appearing leaves. Also, note the shiny H. rosa-sinensis appearance as well.

Figure 2 — Small flower whose color is bright yellow with dark red eye surrounded with orange halo.

Whether or not Sonny has produced something useful, there are a number of programs in East Asia and at the University of California to accomplish this same cross, probably through gene splicing.

A couple of years ago, P. Mukundan of Chennai, India (a third generation nursery owner and noted hybridizer of hibiscus, plumeria, etc.) kindly sent me reference materials on Indian cultivars. In the early records of the Royal Horticultural Society of India, January-June, 1912, several successful crosses are listed between Hibiscus rosa-sinensis and Hibiscus syriacus. These cultivars were then evidently used to develop horticultural significant progeny in an extended breeding program. One wonders if these old records are accurate in their description of breeding parent identity. If so, then, there is already some Rose of Sharon in some of the "garden varieties" developed in early twentieth century India.

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